

Garamendi Hosts Budget Panel at High School

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By Jeremy Spitz

Santa Cruz high-school students received a firsthand lesson in state politics last Friday as Lt. Gov. John Garamendi hosted a panel discussion with local lawmakers and educators to oppose the governor's proposed budget cut to education.

The 10-person panel included representatives from Santa Cruz K-12 education, Cabrillo College and UC Santa Cruz. The group convened in the school's library in front of more than 200 students, faculty and administrators from neighboring school districts.

California is facing a \$14.5 billion state budget deficit. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed drastic cuts across the board in an attempt to close the spending gap, including a 10-percent cut in public education funding, a decrease of approximately \$4.8 billion. The coalition, which also included state Sen. Joe Simitian, had a simple message for the governor: find the money somewhere else.

Barry Kirschen, president of the local chapter of the American Federation of Teachers and an auto shop teacher at Santa Cruz High, tried to bring the numbers to a scale the students could appreciate. He explained that the cuts would eliminate 100,000 teachers in the state, and that 250 in Santa Cruz County had already received pink slips.

"It means that close to 20 of your faculty, some of them right here at Santa Cruz High, that have a classroom this year will not be in a classroom next year," Kirschen said. "It means that more students will be sitting next to you in the classrooms that remain."

The lieutenant governor sought to bring attention to the threats facing education and made the case for more public investment, stressing the importance of education for California's future.

"All of us have a decision to make," Garamendi said to the crowd. "Are we going to reestablish [public education] as one of the principle foundations of economic growth and social justice in the state of California, or are we just going to let it go?"

Garamendi lamented that California had fallen to 46th in the nation in spending per pupil and is poised to drop another \$800 per student under the current plan. He called our current trajectory "shameful," and warned that a weak education system would lead to a weak economy.

Garamendi went further into the territory considered highly dangerous by most politicians. Though he stopped short of mentioning taxes specifically, he said that Californians would have to take steps to increase revenue for education.

"We are the wealthiest state in the entire nation," he said. "The question is, how do we use that wealth? Do we use it in a way that creates future opportunities? We're not doing that right now."

Other members of the panel gave a voice to the different groups affected by the governor's cuts.

"We can't afford these budget cuts," said Marko Realmonte, president of the Cabrillo Student Senate. Realmonte and other panel members went on to describe the larger classes, increased fees, and decreased quality that would follow Schwarzenegger's budget.

Solymar Sola-Negron, a second-year student representing the UC Students Association, said that she is worried about the effect of increased fees on low-income and underrepresented students. She encouraged the students to keep fighting for their education, against the budget cuts and in general: "We have to keep mandating that the needs we have as students are met."